

WOMEN AND PLAYWRITING
IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY
BRITAIN

EDITED BY
TRACY C. DAVIS AND ELLEN DONKIN



PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 1999

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Baskerville 11/12.5pt [CE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloging in publication data

Women and playwriting in nineteenth-century Britain / edited by Tracy C. Davis
and Ellen Donkin.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Contents: The sociable playwright and representative citizen / Tracy C. Davis – To be public
as a genius and private as a woman / Gay Gibson Cima – Mrs. Gore gives tit for tat /
Ellen Donkin – Jane Scott, the writer/manager / Jacky Bratton – Staging the state /
Beth H. Friedman–Romell – The lady playwrights and the wild tribes of the East /
Heidi J. Holder – From a female pen / Katherine Newy – Genre trouble / Susan Bennett –
Sappho in the closet / Denise A. Walen – Conflicted politics and circumspect
comedy / Susan Carlson.

ISBN 0 521 57413 7 (hardback) – ISBN 0 521 65982 5 (paperback)

1. English drama – Women authors – History and criticism.
2. Women and literature – Great Britain – History – nineteenth century.
3. English drama – nineteenth century – History and criticism.

1. Davis, Tracy C., 1960– . 2. Donkin, Ellen, 1949– .

PR728.W6W66 1999

822'.8099287 – dc21 98–38099 CIP

ISBN 0 521 57413 7 hardback

ISBN 0 521 65982 5 paperback

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CHAPTER I

The sociable playwright and representative citizen

Tracy C. Davis

Is there such a thing as what a “normative playwright” does? If we follow the historiography of John Russell Stephens, whose *Profession of the Playwright* is the best guide we have to the experience of being a nineteenth-century writer for the stage, evidently the playwright is a self-promoting entrepreneur who moves easily in the public realm seeking preferment, and whose chance at getting a return on the investment of time and energy put into writing a piece of drama depends on the fickle attentions of managers and the degraded and ever-shifting tastes of audiences. When educated by bitter experience to know that quality does not supersede such obstacles, the “normative playwright” either persists by writing for the stage, switches to another profession altogether, or moves to other genres because evidently there is as porous a boundary between forms (plays, novels, and journalism) as between the genres of comedy and burlesque (Stephens 1992).

If we read accounts of novice playwrights, such as Benjamin Frere’s 1813 *Adventures of a Dramatist*, we might be inclined to regard the rank and file of names listed by Allardyce Nicoll (in *A History of English Drama*, 1930 and 1946) and Gwenn Davis and Beverly A. Joyce (in *Drama by Women to 1900*, 1992) as simply a legion of scribblers – some hacks, some talented – who wrote out of pecuniary need and probably answered the need all too precariously. Some might regard live performance as their best chance, while others (like Frere) also tried to have their plays published and sought the favor of men like William Lane, whose Minerva Press was “exceptionally active in cultivating the production and sale of women’s material” (Turner 1992: 90). In either case, we envisage playwrights who literally go out in public and literally knock on doors trying to hawk their literary wares. Knowing that many women did get their plays produced and published, an account like the following (from a

young woman's diary of 1801) might reinforce how thoroughly odd it would be to imagine a playwright doing anything other than what Stephens outlines. Jane Porter, herself an aspiring author, describes socializing in the family drawing room one day and hearing the unexpected news that Covent Garden's manager was calling upon her sister Maria.

Mr. Harris of Covent Garden Theatre was announced ... He behaved profoundly polite; and told Maria if she would take the trouble to add songs to her play of *The Runaways*, he would bring it out early next season. She consented. He paid her many compliments on the pleasure which its perusal had afforded him; and on her judgement. After his departure, Mr. Mundan [*sic*: the actor] dropt in. On being told what Mr. Harris had said, he expressed his surprise, and declared, that he never knew such an attention as the Manager calling on an author before. (27 January 1801, Folger M.b. 15)

If Munden had never heard of a manager calling on playwrights before, presumably he meant playwrights of either gender. While the visitation is singular, there is no reason to suspect that Harris's subsequent request that he wished Maria Porter to turn *The Runaways*, by then a dramatic opera, into a farce singled out her literary product for any special disrespect (22 May 1801). We might simply infer that some playwrights – however literate – really did not understand the taste of the town, no matter how sound their dramaturgy, and benefited from the advice of professional producers. Knowledge, like success, may have nothing to do with the playwright's gender.

So, while there might be normative experiences of playwriting that cut across gender lines, are there normative experiences of putting a work forward that do not? Teresa de Lauretis suggests “the female subject is the site of differences; differences that are not only sexual or only racial, economic, or (sub)cultural, but all of these together” (1986: 14), yet in considering nineteenth-century women playwrights, which – if any – differences matter? The differences in the statistics of their frequency in being produced at major theatres? The differences in the statistics of their frequency as theatre managers and lessees, and thus their reduced chances for selecting repertoire, affecting taste, challenging public opinion, and putting forward their own vision, whatever that may be? The differences resulting in what constituted women's and men's prestige, their “rightful” claim to public debate, the ease with which media, genres,

or locales were yielded up to them? By these measures, gender matters very much indeed.

There is knowledge to be gained from attempting to recognize or rule out intrinsic differences between men's and women's work, but on the whole dichotomous models mislead, whether we try to trace distinctions in the plays themselves, in playwrights' access to market-places, or in their reactions to exclusion. If we – collectively – are going to change how the nineteenth-century theatre is thought about, clearly we must come up with something other than essentialized gender differences, a catalogue of women's work, or lamentations about the uneven playing field. It appears, for example, from the financial records of the new Drury Lane Theatre after 1812 that female authors received the privilege of free admission – both Marianne Chambers and Elizabeth Inchbald show up in the accounts (Folger W. B. 393 ff 62–63) – but is it necessary to understand them as exceptions to their sex, to quantify their appearance in relation to male authors, or to speculate on why other women with free admissions, such as actresses, did *not* write plays? Does this constitute an uneven playing field, and if so is this what matters most? Should we be looking, in the first place, for the incidence of women writing plays along with the meanings of this practice in terms of social relations? Setting literary professionalism in extraliterary contexts is crucial (Turner 1992: 2), and I propose we do this with modeling inspired by social theory. The debate amongst philosophers, political theorists, cultural historians, and literary historians over the constructions of civil society usefully frames a way to understand where women were in the cultural field of playwriting, and why.

I

I begin by responding to the blank stares and politely disingenuous incantations that I received when I first proposed to organize this volume of essays: “Ah, nineteenth-century British women playwrights. *Such as?*” My vehement assertions that women did indeed write plays – lots of women wrote lots of plays – led me beyond the twentieth-century amnesia to the last century's critical tradition that “women can't write *good* plays,” then to the charge that “women *shouldn't* write plays,” and finally to the prevalent opinion that women should just keep out of the public eye altogether. Feminists

point out that the social division of public and private realms is asymmetrical by gender – in structure, ideology, and practices – so that women’s proper domain was the domestic, and men’s was the marketplace. *Ergo*, women who took their plays to the marketplace transgressed gender norms, and to avoid damage to their sensibilities or reputations, they frequently conducted their pecuniary, contractual, and dramaturgical activities by male proxy (a husband, father, brother, or helpful friend). But by accepting such an explanation, and normatively relegating women to the domestic realm, scholars replicate the oppressive ideology, for the domestic realm is a zone as much marked by male-defined ideology as the public realm; this is why the phrase “head of household” connotes a male, revealing how male authority and female subordination pervade all realms of the social, both at home and beyond (Weintraub 1997: 29–31; Davis 1994: 65–72).

Women had a great deal at stake in writing plays, for it represented in the composition, publication, reading, and performance widespread and important modes of participating in the political act of sociability, construing this as politics not in the sense of the authority of administering the state, but as Jeff Weintraub puts it: “discussion, debate, deliberation, collective decision making, and action in concert” amounting to citizenship in the form of “participatory self-determination, deliberation, and conscious cooperation” (1997: 11, 14). I argue that though it matters when women playwrights did successfully take their work into the public realm, it matters equally that many plied the craft within their homes or schools, because the “intimate domain of family, friendships, and the primary group” and the “instrumental domain of the market and formal institutions,” which are in constant tension with each other, are merely a continuum of sociability (1997: 20–21). In this model, akin to what Bruce Robbins calls “a more relaxed, decentered pluralism (publicness as something spread liberally through many irreducibly different collectives)” (1993: xxi), “the public” is not simply a place, a range of eligible activities, or even an *idea*; and it is certainly not the antithesis of “the private.” Neither the public nor the private is bounded. Neither sphere is singular. One may garner more prestige at a major metropolitan theatre, registering strongly enough to enter the historical record, but activity in any realm was notable activity, and in many respects it was the *same* activity.

A lot is at stake in positing this inclusive and diverse model of sociability, representativeness, and citizenship in the era before electronic media. The theatre and newspapers were, in the nineteenth century, the mass media. In 1865, at a point prior to the boom in theatre building but after the legitimation achieved through the Theatres Regulation Act of 1843, London theatres had a weekly capacity of 228,000, a figure which multiplies to 11,856,000 annually (*Report* 1866: 295).¹ Factoring in provincial theatres would easily triple this figure at a point when the population of England and Wales was approximately 21 million. This is a vast number of people for women playwrights *not* to reach. If we think of the public sphere as an undifferentiated entity, as with late twentieth-century television, it can, in Michael Warner's words, "represent difference as other, but as an available form of subjectivity it remains unmarked" by minority entrants such as women (1993: 241). But if we broaden the scope of investigation to include other realms of women's writing activity, we not only pull into focus the dynamics of the commercial stage as a domain of activity, we *shape* the public sphere rather than taking it as a given (Carpignano *et al.* 1993: 100). As Gay Gibson Cima shows in Chapter 2, the press (like its twin public, the commercial theatre) may claim objectivity but never achieves it. The marketplace may boast democracy, yet does not facilitate it. Everyone of a certain educational and privileged class may be free to think and write, yet does not have access to readers and spectators: that phantom public which is their audience. How might a more prodigiously conceived realm of women's playwriting have affected opinion making, and why has it been the custom of theatre historians to wipe this whole slate nearly clean? Why is something valorized as legitimate cultural work, and when might this apply to one group and not to another?

Throughout modern history, women have been told they cannot do certain things, and women have protested this in order to overcome the discursive bar. The prohibition moves from category to category – in the early seventeenth century it was against women practicing statecraft or acting, in the eighteenth century it was against women preaching or writing criticism, in the nineteenth century it was against women working for pay or playwriting, and in the twentieth century it was against women composing music or directing – but the history of self and group assertion in overcoming the psychological effect of these obstacles is very much a *laissez-faire* argument about what the market will bear. Nineteenth-century

poetry, like Greek scholarship in the eighteenth century, was the domain of men. Nineteenth-century playwriting, like professional sports in the twentieth century, was the domain of women *if we know where to look for them*. Paid public authorship might have been a taboo for women, but it was a taboo frequently breached and just as real and important in the subversions of its strictures as in its observances.

We can no longer safely claim that "Anonymous was a woman" or that pseudonymity served to shield women uniquely from the calumnies of public exposure, for Catherine Judd has demonstrated that men were more likely than women to use cross-gender pseudonyms (1995: 250–68; see also Turner 1992: 79). But the seventeenth-century concept of woman writer as whore does seem to have been displaced in the nineteenth century by the concept of public woman writer as man (or usurper of masculine prerogative) (Judd 1995: 260–61). Still, this is an uneasy claim as long as gender is isolated from other aspects of social identity (Kaplan 1992: 13). We are unlikely to forget Voltaire's dictum that "the composition of a tragedy requires testicles," or Byron's gracious allowance that Joanna Baillie might be freak enough to have, or at least borrow, a pair (Finney 1989: 17; Byron 1976: 203). While I agree with Norma Clarke that "the history of women's writing is a history of social, cultural and personal interaction far more complex than any history drawn from the trajectories of men's lives can possibly convey," Davidoff and Hall's concept of "structured inequality" must be carefully and cautiously justified, based on sound evidentiary principles (Clarke 1990: 26; Davidoff and Hall 1987: 272), for sometimes inequality allows women into domains at one point and not another, as sociologists of reputations demonstrate. The "empty field phenomenon," for example, which Tuchman and Fortin document for the novel may only be true for their data. They demonstrate the relationship between the maintenance and creation of exclusionary practices: women were allowed to enter the socially and culturally devalued realm of novel writing circa 1840–79, but during the novel's late Victorian period of redefinition, and especially during Edwardian institutionalization of the form into a high cultural product, women were squeezed out (1989: *passim*). John Russell Stephens's lack of attention to periodicity and assumptions about the collapsibility of gender would not excuse us from mistaking the frequent Georgian or mid-Victorian wail "Where are the good

British playwrights?" for an "empty field phenomenon" that made drama ripe for women's incursions. The invective leveled at Joanna Baillie for presuming to have the testicular tragic or Catherine Gore for channeling the comic muse suggests that sociology needs a very different paradigm for explaining the playwriting realm, a pursuit with a 2,500-year history. On the other hand, it is probably premature to surrender to Dorothy Mermin's remark that "drama had entered a long decline, so that the paucity of female playwrights did not materially affect the literary landscape" (1993: 43).

One of the most appealing aspects of sources like Frere's memoir *Adventures of a Dramatist* is that it characterizes London as the brokerage of art, and the production and/or publication of plays as being market driven. Arriving in the capital, he proclaims: "Hail, London! Universal Mart; the central place of traffic for talents, beauty, and reputation, where, at the sound of Folly's rattle, Fashion displays her wares and every vice finds customers" (1813: vol. II, 35). As critics and historians, we need to be constantly aware that playwriting existed in relation to marketplaces, whether those marketplaces were private, provincial, or nonremunerative (though perhaps garnering other marks of social status), whether they were solely through publishing, or in the volatile realm of professional public production. Eschewing the custom of theatre history by refusing to recognize the professional as more valid than the reading, amateur, home, or school markets; or refusing to stratify the major from minor playhouses; and valorizing the mere existence and survival of women's play texts in whatever form, we may lose sight of just how extraordinarily "unprotected" dramatic writing was in a financial sense from condemnation, oblivion, and censure, in the nineteenth century as well as now, conditions that affected all aspirants, except perhaps the male managers and their sons.

Eighteenth-century moral philosophy established *laissez-faire's* inextricable linking of private and public activities in economic pursuits (through sentimentality and capitalism) (Marshall 1986). This "associative public sphere" (as distinct from a model of the purely mercantile or the purely governmental "public") is where socializing and cultural production both occurred. It draws a contrast between the "public" (be it a salon in which women predominated, or a men's club where women were banned) and the "solitary" (the private, as distinct from the domestic) (Klein 1995; Wach 1996; Benhabib 1995; Wolf 1997), for the public, in this formulation, aligns

with what is perceptible as social intercourse. Thus, the authoring of a play is an act of the associative public sphere, necessarily implicating publicity (publicness), whether it was bound for publication, home theatricals, professional production – or utter obscurity – for in common with other kinds of public acts, playwriting “stands in opposition to both doing and keeping silent” (Huet 1994: 57), just as a thinker who neither legislates nor dictates still makes interventions into the public through ideas which may incur debate and perhaps inspire action in others. This is the concrete version of civil society in which a “theatrical” model of sociability exists through symbolic display and self-representation (Robbins 1993: xix; Ryan 1990) as well as in “the structural separation between performance and audience” in which “the ideological category of the public is constructed,” whether the performance in question is a chat show or a democratic election (Carpignano *et al.* 1993: 95).

Placing women thus in the associative public realm forces the question of how to regard women playwrights as “representative citizenry” when, in an official sense, they are neither representative of citizens (enfranchised men) nor fully authorized as citizens who make representations of things (such as artists). Are they representative of women sharing their class and background, of other playwrights, or perhaps of women in general through the characters they created? Do they achieve the status of the bourgeois citizen because they adopt sanitized modes of address (Deem 1996: 527), passing censorship and eschewing what is recognizably radical? If the closet drama is supposed to designate that which is “not dramatic” or “not stageable,” what is at stake in power and prestige, especially in recent claims by Catherine Burroughs that the closet celebrated women’s cultural worth (1997: 143–68). Is the genteel authoress *more* of a representative citizen in not publishing or professionally producing her plays? Or is her niche – as an adaptor and translator, or a children’s dramatist, or an author of recital pieces in dialect – indicative of the “broad church” which we will write into the historiography of representative citizenry? Shall we let women succeed on their own terms?

Finally, in considering the valences of public and private, how are women’s plays used as platforms to debate (or to represent) things of concern? There is, of course, the likelihood that the major and minor issues of the day were dramatized by women, and that this variously supported and challenged the status quo (Burke 1996).

Elsewhere in this volume, Susan Carlson, Denise Walen, Beth Friedman-Romell, and Heidi Holder take up precisely this point. But additionally, how did women playwrights interpose themselves into the discursive realms of the public and private and of communities of speech and action which I am calling sociability? When Baillie writes to another woman about retiring to her study to prepare the last edition of her plays, she illustrates this issue beautifully:

I have been much occupied since last [J]une in correcting the proof sheets of my new publication. I thought I had done with all this business, but circumstances arose to make me desirous of leaving all my Dramas in print corrected under my own eye, so I was obliged to throw aside the indolence & desire of quiet & privacy so nature[al] to old aye [*sic*]. (12 December 1835)

In other words, retiring into her study to correct proofs constituted a public act, for it would result in publicity, publicness, and posterity over which she exerted agency. Even the housebound woman had many ways to be public. Jane Porter describes how, in theatricals put up by family and friends, an audience of twenty people made her fearful, yet the next night's crowd of fifty people "terrified to death all of us" because of the size of the audience and because it included individuals who were not part of the Porters' regular circle (25 and 26 May 1801). Thus, even within the home theatrical, varying degrees of exposure were incurred when audiences expanded beyond the close circles of everyday sociability.

This sets into context questions about the "significance" of women's dramatic activity (significant to whom, for what reasons, and with what chance of registering instrumentally on prevailing evolutionary models of historiography) and opens up questions about the "significance" of different kinds of data as well as individual figures themselves. At this point in our work charting this terrain, a knoll is as noteworthy as a mountain. I no more want to notice only "significant" women and judge them only by measures of professional notoriety and influence than to restrict myself to using nineteenth-century criteria of seeking "women of virtue" or "feminine writing" (Ezell 1993: 68–69, 94–96). But I still strive to understand how gender matters. The tropes in Frere's *Adventures of a Dramatist* which depict the playwright as eccentric in the eyes of fellow beings, or which depict high-flown ambition as noble in contrast to the crass exigencies of commerce, may have very different

valences when we think of how the dramatist was a gendered person and what ensued from this fact. Frere's allusion, early on, that relatives questioned his soundness of mind when he became immersed in composing his play, to the extent that they considered committing him to a madhouse, might read comically from him while from a woman such as Georgina Weldon, who was committed by her husband to a lunatic asylum, it is deeply serious, potentially tragic, and ridden with the fear and loathing inherent in a deeply misogynist culture (Owen 1990: 160–67). Likewise, the dramatist's lengthy ruminations on ambition might amount to the flight of Icarus, aiming high but with a calamitous result, while the same ruminations on the part of Icarus's wife or mother might be regarded as a ludicrous display of conceit with no promise in either their conception or execution. The cartographer has an advantage over us by having absolute standards of measurement to distinguish the knoll from the mountain, the hillock from the promontory, and the forest from the bluff. For historians dealing with gender, there is no counterpart to sea level from which we can measure the striations of elevation, and no fully trustworthy classificatory or numerical standards for distinguishing one figure from another, or even the characteristics of an individual from a pack. What is genuinely safe and appropriate to assume or assert on gender grounds is entirely up for debate.

It is promising, I think, to consider how in the nineteenth century occupation became the core identity for men, and what it represented when women attempted to move in and claim something so prominently public as the identity of a dramatist when that dramatist's trajectory was toward the commercial stage. Scholarly learning and writerly ability had to be accounted for, and often explained away, in women. Elizabeth Carter's penchant for housekeeping warranted remarking alongside her translation of the Greek Stoic Epictetus, as much as Baillie's predilection for making her own pies and puddings appears in an anecdote about Sotheby relaying the exciting news to her of a provincial revival of *De Monfort*: an anecdote related by none other than Frances Kemble (1878: vol. III, 272).² Even in the wake of Elizabeth Inchbald and Hannah Cowley – economically successful playwrights who could be regarded as prototypes – the woman playwright was neither a stable nor an uncontested category. Women made gains during the century's course, but the idea of separate spheres retained discursive force.

However elusive the realm of privacy, where an authentic self exists free from others' expectations, women's publicity in horizontal and vertical senses had official, if not real, borders.³

As Laura Thatcher Ulrich masterfully demonstrates, women's labour may exist as the uncelebrated, and even unpaid, warp to the woof threads of masculinized capitalism (1991). Bernard Miège argues that contemporary cultural labor is determined "by the place it occupies in the relations of production," and that whether a performance is "in an artisanal, a capitalist or a non-market form (amateurism)" it is all still within the capitalist relations of production (1989: 25). These are useful reminders that "separate spheres" is not necessarily the optimal metaphor for understanding relations of a playwright to her environment (or posterity). Working in nonmarket (amateur) circumstances does not necessarily constitute marginalization. Nancy Gutierrez argues this point with respect to Renaissance closet drama, making a case for the political content of women's dramatic output (1991: 233–52); the same idea is applicable, I think, to later playwrights' status as writers and workers in the theatre industry. If they do not sell their work to commercial theatres, if they write with profit for only an amateur, home, or school market, or even if they accrue no payment of any kind for their dramatic writing, they still exist in relation to others who do these things. They are not lesser, or necessarily even different, but are contiguous with others who pursue the same craft. Thinking otherwise would render Hannah More lesser than Elizabeth Inchbald, rather than focused in another direction with another purpose.

II

It is germane to ask if the dramatic output of women justifies positing their work as a coherent minor literature on its own terms, and if so, what those terms should be. Although Deleuze and Guattari use a psychoanalytic base to define a "minor literature," their basic criteria resonate suggestively for further historical scrutiny. Referring specifically to Franz Kafka, minor literature, they claim, is not necessarily the literature of a minority, and comes not from a minor language, but is constructed by a minority within a major language (their chief example being early twentieth-century Jewish literature from Warsaw and Prague written in German). Such

authors experience the “impossibility of not writing” because a national consciousness exists through literature. When one’s vernacular language is so localized and the minority elite’s language is so distinct from mass culture, a minor literature deterritorializes in ways “appropriate for strange and minor usage” (1986: 16; see also Bensmaïa 1994), like African–American syntax in the urban USA, or Ibsen’s use of Danish to write plays of Norwegian life while exiled in Germany and Italy.

In a minor literature, everything is political, so every individual intrigue has political significance connecting, for example, familial concerns immediately to environmental context. Major literatures can luxuriate in an Oedipal triangle, but minor literatures necessarily have a “political program.” This accords with feminist critics’ desire to find political valences in women’s writing and to elevate commentary to the level of allegory, as in Ntozake Shange’s celebration of Frantz Fanon’s “jungle breathing” (1984: 22; see also Gutierrez 1991). Thus, in minor literatures, everything has a collective value: “Indeed, scarcity of talent is in fact beneficial and allows the conception of something other than a literature of masters” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 17). And while consensus amongst a minor literature’s writers is unnecessary, paradoxically each individual’s statements constitute common action. This suits an image of women playwrights as cultural guerrillas, battling gender bias on stage and in rehearsal halls, or retreating to their boudoirs to nurse tender scars, but always having to prove something beyond their own individual worth. Deleuze and Guattari assert that “if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility” (1986: 17). This is an idea, of course, and not proof, but it is provocative to think of nineteenth-century women playwrights as the revolutionary vanguard, akin to how Beckett and Joyce rank as Irish authors in the history of Modernism. When using a language “not their own” – French in Beckett’s case or English in Joyce’s, or 2,500 years of Aristotelean dramatic theory as a possible corollary for women – the minority is susceptible to accusations of unsuitability on the grounds of undereducation and the impropriety of literary aspiration. But this also explains what is at stake in persisting, and why authors did so in many guises. The clear answer: “steal the baby from its crib,

walk the tightrope” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 19). In other words: appropriate what is already culturally half yours, take it to town, and summon every reservoir of strength, tact, and mental discipline to keep balanced.

Of course, minor figures are not the same thing as a minor literature. The distinction has to do with the security of one’s claims to public air time, and the degree to which one strives to adopt without critique the standards of the major literature. On just these terms, Frances Kemble launches into Mrs. Norton’s new play in 1831:

What a terrible piece! what atrocious situations and ferocious circumstances! – tinkering, starving, hanging – like a chapter out of the Newgate Calendar. But, after all, she’s in the right; she has given the public what they desire, given them what they like. Of course it made one cry horribly; but then of course one cries when one hears of people reduced by sheer craving to eat nettles and cabbage-stalks. Destitution, absolute hunger, cold and nakedness, are no more subjects for artistic representation than sickness, disease, and the *real* details of idiocy, madness, and death. All art should be an idealized, elevated representation (not imitation) of nature; and when beggary and low vice are made the themes of the dramatist, as in this piece . . . they seem to me to be clothing their inspirations in wood or lead, or some base material, instead of gold or ivory. (Kemble 1878: vol. III, 36–37)

This resonates with Neoclassical ideas preferring elevated dramatic incident, character, and setting, as if pitting Schiller against Zola. Kemble concedes that Norton knows the taste of the town and the fundamentals of theatrical dramaturgy, reserving her criticism as an expression of taste taking the form of a judgment upon dramatic theory. But it is also a political remark insofar as Kemble’s preference to banish the destitute from dramatic address is a very loaded position to take in 1831, the year before the first Reform Act. Jane Moody’s refutation of boundaries between the cultural fields of the theatre and politics, as a repudiation of the nonsensical “mental theatre” of Regency dramaturgy, might well be extended to such specific instances of dramatic opinion throughout the century, in line with Mary Waldron’s work on Ann Yearsley’s *Earl Goodwin* (Moody 1996: 223–44; Waldron 1996: 173–205). By Kemble’s criteria, Mrs. Norton’s play is a robust weed: too much like popular taste and too little like art. Whether it fulfills the criteria of a minor literature depends on longer historical trends represented in other women’s

work, and the critique brought to bear on prevailing dramatic theory and production values (the “languages” of “major” theatre).

III

So, in conclusion, the question is not were there women playwrights, but where they were, and the consequences of this within the associative public sphere. The conventions of theatre history send us to look on the commercial stages, especially in London and specifically in the West End, giving even higher preference to the most aesthetically prestigious houses. While many women had plays produced in such venues, it takes more than mere presence (to borrow a proverb) to make a house a home. In all likelihood, women’s plays remained an oddity on the commercial stage for more reasons than just their numerical inferiority. The strictures on women’s sociability meant that they spent much of their lives at home; supposedly, this was the saving grace for any woman with a “room of her own” and literary ambition to write novels within the comfort and sanctity of domestic privacy. Yet why should we suppose that the custom of composing moral plays for school or home production – a practice most famously credited to Hannah More – is any less significant as a historical phenomenon than Macready’s championing of the plays of Lord Lytton or George Eliot’s success as a novelist? Or that because productions in schools and drawing rooms are not reviewed in *The Times* they are of insignificant social or political consequence for the students and parents or friends and relations who gathered there to perform, watch, or even just listen to a reading? Or that despite their prevalence in sociable contexts other than the commercial stage, women’s plays have no coherence as a class of texts, and therefore cannot be regarded as “a literature” (minor or otherwise).

We need to investigate women’s lives *and* their work in a context for interpretation that sets theatrical activity within the options for sociability construed as politics by “discussion, debate, deliberation, collective decision making, and action in concert” (Weintraub 1997: 11). Florence Bell wittily epitomises this in her instructions for *Fairy Tale Plays and How to Act Them* (1899), addressed to children and their parents:

Some people prefer to make the auditorium quite dark during the performance. Personally, I find this depressing at an amateur play, which is

a social occasion as much as a dramatic one . . . The methods of Bayreuth or of the Lyceum, which I have heard invoked with great gravity in discussing this particular question, do not seem to me to bear upon it much. (xv)

Playwrights, thus, operate within their own (appropriate) communities of speech and action, while they themselves are poised between doing and silence, in the “impossibility of not writing” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 16). This is potentially revolutionary, and potentially not. Susan Carlson’s observation “that comedy can be an instigator of social change as well as a blueprint for plurality” speaks to the circumstances by which a playwright presented her work as well as what is argued within a play (1991: 161). Social history needs to be closely investigated in tandem with dramatic theory to seek explanation for puzzling ambiguities and what some critics called blatant ineptitude. Consider Emma Robinson’s *Richelieu in Love*, which was for at least eight years banned by the Lord Chamberlain. When produced at the Haymarket in 1852, a reviewer for a periodical addressed to architects and building contractors remarked that for a play by a lady it was “rather a bold one, and chiefly remarkable for terse and sparkling writing, but it is for the most part the sparkle of pounded ice, – there is a want of warmth and feeling. Still the piece amuses” (*Builder*, 6 November 1852: 709). The valences of the last sentence, “Still the piece amuses,” speak volumes, for the play was billed as a drama. Women’s writing can underpin political culture, just by virtue of existing in the wake of such barbed praise, but at the very least by investigating it we will undermine historiography and challenge the comfortable categories of activities and the genres that they contain.

As a sociable playwright and a representative citizen, the female dramatist entered into a contractual relationship every time she put pen to paper. She was still a daughter, wife, or mother, with the reciprocally unbalanced legal and caretaking obligations that entailed, negotiating her writing with these responsibilities. She was still a friend, neighbor, and parishioner, with the visitations, exchanges, and observations involved in fulfilling those roles. Though not a citizen of the state, enfranchised for her opinions, she nevertheless partook in the cultural life of the nation, reading about and performing in its rituals, and by writing also contributing to her class rituals’ solidification or evolutionary change. And by writing she also staked her claim as a colleague of other writers and creative people, whether her colleagueship was enacted or symbolic, and

whether her coparticipants in the theatre were mutually known or not. She was, in Jeremy Bentham's sense of the term, socially engineered and yet she also exerted agency through writing, and a particular kind of agency through *dramatic* writing in pursuing her interests. She became an active participant, a member of many communities, deliberately signaling the dialectic tensions between household and marketplace, acting in concert with all other women of her kind. The outcome of this varied amongst women: Jane Scott, Melinda Young, and Sarah Lane achieved local celebrity whilst Joanna Baillie, Catherine Gore, Emma Robinson, and Felicia Hemans came to national prominence; Florence Bell, Constance Beerbohm, Harriet Glazebrook, and Lillie Davis wrote dozens of texts for amateurs whilst Elizabeth Maxwell (Braddon) and Fanny Kemble were produced by professionals across the nation; and Elizabeth Inchbald, Marie Saker, Teresa de Camp, and Isabel Bateman were actresses who wrote plays, whilst Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper (as Michael Field), Isabella Harwood (as Ross Neil), and Mary Russell Mitford were verse playwrights who also wrote in other genres and forms. What is true across their ranks, however, is an economy of exchange instrumentally connected in multiply overlapped spheres, "assisting the equitable negotiation or arbitration of competing interests through democratic processes" (Curran 1991: 29–30). Women enjoyed different privileges than men, just as women in different classes and regions experienced different opportunities, but if they are classified as a counterpublic sphere – as opposed to one integrated with but not necessarily visible to what is historicized as the public and private – it sets them aside, oppositionally and marginally, rather than as minor voices within the dominant culture and historiography. Because they are in no way unified, either mythically or formally, they are not a counterpublic but rather part of the public sphere struggling with the structures and settings of sociability leading to representation.

Bruce Robbins writes that "to belong to the public sphere has always meant to wield some share of the ruling power" (1993: xx). While this kind of belonging is rarely within the grasp of women playwrights, we see through their life histories and critical reception what is at stake in reaching for their share. If, as Carpignano, *et al.* assert, "the formation of public opinion becomes an act of governing" and "Public opinion becomes a matter of public relations" (1993: 100), we start to understand the forces that strove to keep

playwriting a masculine occupation, that continually named men's plays as normative and women's plays as gender-marked, and that encourage forgetfulness – despite overwhelming evidence in standard sources – that there were nineteenth-century British women playwrights. What we are urgently pressed to explore, at this juncture, are the contours of their work in the context of their own and others' ruling power, relative to public opinion and public relations of more than just the official discourse and traditional categories of theatre and literary practice.

NOTES

I am grateful to Linda Fitzsimmons and Margaret Ezell, who both offered encouragement and critical responses to this work in its latter stages.

- 1 London music halls, on a one-a-night system, had five times this capacity.
- 2 As Clarke argues, "this, in its insidious ways, defines woman in relation to man every bit as much as heterosexual marriage might contain an identity as a writer within the public facade of a married woman. While the work and lives of women warrant complex modeling, we will do well to remember that it was women of all classes, but not men, who had to uphold "their fundamental entitlement to speak and write" (1990: 26).
- 3 Here I echo Dawn Keetley's sense of a "permeable border" between private and public, but in the context outlined by George Chittolini of the horizontal and vertical structures of "clans, kin groups, courtly circles, factions, and parties" which are "private in that they are not always formalized like public institutions" yet are "draped in institutional dignity" while outside official systems. The sociability of literary circles might easily be added to this group (Keetley 1996: 188; Chittolini 1995: 840; Kaplan 1992; Clarke 1990).

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